

Immigrant Experiences: Vozchan Parsegian Hovsepian

Vozchan Parsegian Hovsepian, an Armenian emigrated from eastern Turkey to Massachusetts in 1916 at age eight.

I was born in 1908.... My mother and father had been educated in German and American mission schools...as orphans. My mother became a cook at the American hospital. My father had been trained as a carpenter and decided to come to the United States after some of his business partnerships didn't work out. Also, they were drafting Armenian men into the Turkish Army....

I went to kindergarten at the same mission school as my parents did.... But we were soon aware that the Turkish army had arrived. The city was under siege from April through May 1915. I remember walking through the streets... hearing the bullets and seeing people duck.... Mother being very busy in the hospital.... The Armenians below would watch for [cannon] balls to fall, grab the fuses out of the balls, and use the powder for fighting back. About the end of May 1915, the Turkish soldiers left... as the Russian army was approaching. The Russian general... issued orders that everyone must leave. He gave us a day's notice.

My sister, my mother, and I started off on a cart, sitting on top of somebody else's furniture. That didn't last long. The rest of the flight had to be on foot. We headed...toward Russian Armenia.... [We walked] two weeks... when my little sister was lost....

We arrived amid spreading disease and crowding. During the first night there, my mother bought a loaf of bread with a gold piece she saved. It was so hard that I couldn't eat it. Another night she gave a small coin for a shawl to cover me. We had hailstones that drew blood. We had to drink the water that we walked in.... But we found my little sister. Russian soldiers were playing with her....

My mother went to the archbishop and offered to cook for the refugees...where [we] stayed for the next year.

In time, she persuaded the archbishop that she wanted to leave to get an American education for her children.... Eventually we arrived in Sweden...somehow made it to Liverpool...took a crowded ship to America....

I remember the crowding and wondering if we would be admitted. Fortunately we were in fair health. My uncle took us to New York City and then up to...Massachusetts. My mother immediately got work in a shoe factory. She made six dollars a week; we learned to live on that...and that's how we survived....

I was in high school at the time. My mother said, "...Learn a trade." So I learned auto repair. One day, while I was repairing a car, a man...explain[ed] that I could study engineering for free at the Lowell Institute, an evening school within MIT....

Eventually I went on to a doctorate in nuclear physics and became director of research of the New York office of the Atomic Energy Commission. In the mid-1950s...[I became] the first Dean of Engineering at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI).... I've been involved with many nuclear issues... hearings with the Joint Committee of Congress on Atomic Energy...and then...organized the Armenian Educational Council Incorporated.

The Armenian communities began to be quite concerned about the fact that so little had been said about the massacres and the [Armenian] genocide. So we decided that there should be a public event...to commemorate.... We began to collect oral histories of those who had lived through the massacres. Then came a young architect from Germany who was worried about the Armenian monuments in Turkey and how they could be preserved.... What has stayed with me throughout my life is what my mother taught us: "Just do your best, just do your best." And the moral code and ethics that we grew up with stayed with me.

Emmy E. Werner, *Passages to America: Oral Histories of Child Immigrants from Ellis Island and Angel Island* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2009), 66-70.

Immigrant Experiences: Doukenie Papandreos

Doukenie Papandreos emigrated from Greece in 1919 at age fifteen.

My name "Doukenie" has a meaning. When the Turks kept Constantinople, my great-grandfather was one of the dukes. He was murdered. But his son escaped capture, and came to my town.... Every family, if they had a boy, had to name him "Duke" as a commemoration. Being that my father only had two girls, instead of... "Duke" they [picked] "Duchess." And to not be afraid of the Turks, they turned [it] to "Doukenie," to further hide my origin. They used to tell the story that our family was from royalty, which, of course, isn't true.

I was born in... northern Greece. The Turks... chased all the Greeks out.... The Turks are not very progressive. They didn't rebuild... fix... or clean the town... life was very horrible. And many times they used to try to steal girls, rape the girls.... So always we lived in fear....

We used to carry wood to school in the wintertime to warm our rooms, but we had to learn... to have knowledge so that we would get out from slavery.... Always, our dream was that someday, maybe, the Greeks will recapture our towns, which were taken from us.

My father helped his mother raise four children.... She used to weave Turkish carpets. When my father grew up, he wanted to go away.... He started a vineyard and sold the wine to Constantinople. He was also a sheriff....

But when the first World War started... I was eleven years old. We didn't have anything to eat. The Turks... used to sell us bread... [and] mix sand in it, just to kill us. They closed the schools. So my father, who was very intelligent and self-made, [taught] us at home for a few years.... I used to think at night, "Someday I will go to America and become somebody...."

My uncle was a heavy gambler... playing poker with a man who... sold boat tickets to America. My uncle said, "We'll play one round for my niece." And he won. He said, "We'll play another for the expenses." And he won.... I was so excited. My mother was happy for me... my father... said, "Never a child of mine will go away from my arms...."

Fifteen years old? Never!" For three days I begged him... "Dad, trust me.... Give me a chance."

Meanwhile, I heard that a classmate of mine was going to America. Without saying anything to my father or mother I went to my friend's house, and I said to my friend's mother... "Can you take me with you? I got my tickets too." She agreed. My father agreed. "All right," he said, "as long as you're with a family."

I took one small, old valise. One coat... clothes.... That's all.... [We] slept in one room with four bunk beds, but moved to first class.... I used to go to the deck and play mandolin.

After thirteen days, we finally came here and I was so happy that I was now in America. I saw the statue of Liberty, and I said to myself, "Lady, you're beautiful. You opened your arms, and you get all the foreigners here...." Always, while I was here, that statue was in my mind.

My dear, I saw tears at Ellis Island. I saw tears with happiness, I also saw tears with pain. Many people had to wait, and they were living in agony. Next to me was an Italian woman with three children... one of the children got sick.... All of a sudden a doctor and two nurses took the child away. The mother couldn't speak English.... They were saying that the child had to go to the hospital.... The mother was crying and I was crying with her.... The guards were all Irish people, and they used to go, "Come on, come on." Like lambs to slaughter, we used to go upstairs to the rooms to sleep.... I couldn't enjoy nothing. I was afraid they were going to send me back.... I promised everybody that someday I'm going to come back as a doctor.

Finally, the third day, my uncle came to take me.... [He] didn't have a lot of money. We came by subway to his house in... Queens. Two rooms, no shower, no bathtub. All the houses looked the same.

Peter Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words* (New York: Facts on File, 1997), 280-285.

Immigrant Experiences: George Banover

George Banover emigrated from Czechoslovakia to New York in 1922 at age six.

My mother, my sister, and I came with one trunk. In this trunk, besides everyday clothing...was an overstuffed feather quilt and pillows.... I vaguely remember that we were driven by horse and carriage to the train station in Trencin...where my mother used to go to peddle wares or buy things—farm produce, chickens, ducks, geese, whatever. There was no market in Dolna Suca. Anything you wanted you had to go to Trencin....

I remember walking...to the boat...we had a room in the lower part of the vessel; enough room for my mother and sister and I to sleep. It was very hot and very noisy.... Any time we were down there it was just thump, thump, thump. It was very uncomfortable. My mother, of course—along with everybody else—got seasick.... And so as a six-year-old who wasn't seasick, I had the run of the main deck. I had a ball on the vessel, as far as I can recall. I would run around on the deck and try to keep from falling overboard. I would climb the mast. I must have really driven the deckhands crazy....

Of course, we weren't permitted to go up to the other decks. They were reserved for first-class and second-class passengers. And so we were fed down in the hold. I remember eating this one kind of soup I had never tasted before and not liking it. It was like broth with small granular things floating in it. The soups we had at home were real nice, thick hearty things you could chew on. [Laughs.]

We arrived August 2, I believe. I think the trip lasted ten days. I recall as we started to approach the shore, we saw birds and things floating in the water. I wasn't aware of the Statue of Liberty. I don't know if anybody pointed it out. If they did, it didn't leave an impression, let's put it that way.

The rest is just a blur. I, we, everybody had their baggage collected, waiting to get off and

onto the ferryboat to Ellis Island. Just one constant blur of activity. I do remember after we left Ellis Island...my father was waiting there. We were all joyful. My sister spotted him first. She pointed him out to me because I did not remember him. I just remember that he greeted us, and there was hugging and kissing. And we went on a train, and then a bus, and he took us to this house where he had been living with this Slovak family in Newark.

Our first winter in this country was miserable. My father had found a cold-water flat with a wood stove, not too far from the place where he had been rooming. I can still remember my mother and father in the snow, cutting wood...I can remember running around picking up scraps of wood and bringing them home for kindling for the fire.

We tried to be self-sufficient. At that time there was no aid or public assistance. Even if it was offered, I don't think my father would have taken it. He was poor, but he still had his pride. And it was cold. That winter I caught the measles. I had just started kindergarten and had to miss school for about a month....

The other [challenge] was bigotry. It was an inhospitable neighborhood.... There was a grumpy lady living next door who would not associate with us. The Germans ignored us. But I think the people who were the most bigoted to us were the Irish. They seemed to go out of their way to make life miserable for us. To them, we were the dumb Polacks. They had only two terms for any foreigner. You were either a dumb Polack or you were a dumb Hunky, meaning Hungarian. And there was no other distinction.

After I became older and read a lot about the history of Ireland, it always amazed me how the Irish, who were persecuted over the years, would not be more understanding or compassionate or considerate....

Peter Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words* (New York: Facts on File, 1997), 293-294.

Immigrant Experiences: Roberta Escobar

Roberta Escobar emigrated from Brazil via Portugal in 1925 at age eight.

I was born in Manaus, Brazil, the state of Amazonas...in the northern part, right under the equator.... My mother taught school to the children of the plantation workers....

I was a sickly child. I had malaria, and they told me that I was going into a coma.... My father also was coming down with malaria. So the doctor recommended that we all get out, because otherwise we would die. It was getting that critical. I was about four. And that's when we left and went to Portugal, and stayed there three years, then came to the United States....

My mother's sister, Nilda, married a fellow of Portuguese descent.... He was...sent by some zoo in America to catch snakes and bring them back. I heard...one of his snakes had babies in my grandmother's basement. That didn't make him too popular. But they married and moved to Massachusetts, where he was from....

We went by boat from Brazil to Portugal first. I was very sick. My mother was nursing my father and I. So the trip was not very nice. In Portugal, I remember...the church chimes. My father and I would dance in the kitchen to those chimes.... We lived in the country, and he traveled...to work....

We decided to come to the United States because Nilda's husband, Daniel Days. His [last] name was Diaz, but they changed to Days, because the [English] translation.... He was writing to my father always urging him to come to the United States.... After being there three years, my father realized there was no future for him in Portugal.... I don't think my aunt was too anxious to have us leave...[she] thought that was the wrong move, leaving to go to a strange country....

My father planned everything...well in advance.... We were in a cabin [upper class].... In New York, up on deck, everybody was trying to get a glimpse...as we were approaching.

We had an exam by doctors at the Ellis Island. They put some kind of a number on our garment...gave me a biscuit, and some milk.

We arrived here in May, still in need of a coat...[without] much baggage.... We went to Fall River, Massachusetts...for four months.... I don't think there were five hundred Brazilians throughout the United States.... My father wanted my mother to pick up English as soon as possible.... So she shopped in the supermarkets that were strictly English-speaking.... I knew how to count up to ten, and that was it.

My father couldn't find work...because Fall River was a mill town and the industry there was factory work. So he wrote to different companies in New York. The day he was to leave, he played the violin.... After a few weeks, or so...he sent for me and for my mother to come...to Brooklyn, where he found a room.... It had a two-burner stove, but very little [else]. My mother worked on Twelfth Street at the Ansonia Clock Company.

Every Friday we went to a movie.... When we came out, there was a little tiny store where you could have a hot dog, or my father would buy me a Love Nest candy bar. So that was our beginning of life in the United States....

You had to be twenty-one to vote, and when I became twenty-one I voted and gave my citizenship number, and that's all you needed. The fact that you were voting showed that you wanted to be an American. I feel that I'm very American, since I didn't attend school anywhere else, and I regret I don't know more of the history of Brazil, but I certainly feel that I'm very much part of the American Dream. I regret that I didn't go back to Manaus, where I was born. Because now, instead of rubber plantations, I'm told they have Sony and all these other different companies and radios... so Manaus is now thriving again as a different kind of thing, and they restored the opera house, and I would love to see it."

Peter Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words* (New York: Facts on File, 1997), 376-380.

Immigrant Experiences: Marjorie Kellhorn

Marjorie Kellhorn emigrated from Ireland to New York in 1925 at age eighteen.

My father came to America first when he was sixteen years old. As a matter of fact, he was one of the men working on the Brooklyn Bridge when it was built...a carpenter by trade. He came back in 1914, and I remember being very excited. I was about eight years old.... I was born in Offaly, King's Country, right in the center of Ireland.... I remember my mother's bread and stews and...Tapioca rich puddings, and Jell-O... fresh vegetables from our garden... and of course, potatoes was the main dish....

In America, my father had two brothers and two sisters. We corresponded with them all the time.... My father loved America, that's why he wanted to go back. But my mother absolutely refused, and she certainly never wanted me to come here. But at that time, everybody had the idea of coming to America. The people were leaving, boatloads and boatloads, you know, and I just got the same urge....

There was very little to pack in those days. I just brought one large suitcase.... Saying goodbye was very hard, very sad. A lot of my cousins came...to see me off. My parents too, of course. And I was young. I was eighteen. That's what worried my mother....

We spent three days...being examined by doctors. Our clothes were fumigated. They put stuff in your hair for lice. It was routine for everyone. There were many sent back. Several people had been turned away for heart murmur. One fellow had something wrong with a finger and he was turned down.... When I see these people coming in illegally today, it kind of annoys me because it wasn't easy at that time. It was very difficult, you had to be well.

I didn't know anybody else on the boat, only who I met.... By the second day I was so sick I didn't eat anything for the rest of the week. It was a shame because there was a gorgeous dining room on the ship. There was a bar, a recreation room.... It had everything. There was dancing on the dock. I met several Irish

fellows who loved to play music. As sort of a souvenir they handed out bands to everyone... with the "S.S. Roosevelt" embroidered on it. I've kept it all these years.

I landed here on April 17. It was 1925. We came in the dark and docked in the harbor.... I was like everybody else: excited, but I didn't know what to expect.... They examined me all over again, but I was not there more than three or four hours.... Mr. Grimes, from one of the travelers' aid societies, followed me up to see that I was in the right place, which I thought was wonderful. I was looking for one of my sisters, but I didn't know what she looked like. Then she had called my name.

She took me to my other sister's apartment on the Lower East Side. A lot of Germans and Irish and Italian. She had five rooms there, two bedrooms, kitchen, dining room, and living room. She had electricity, running water, everything. I couldn't believe it. I stayed with her for about a month.

I got a job at Macy's, but I didn't take it. Instead, I took a governess job for this little boy. His father was a professor of English. They were going to Cape Cod for the summer. That summer happened to be very hot. A lot of people died in New York from the heat in 1925.

In the meantime, I wrote to my parents steadily and the following year, I paid all their expenses to come to America. My mother, she didn't like giving up her nursing job and her pension, but she wanted to be with her children. My sisters and I met them at Ellis Island. We were called in by the doctor. My father had become a sick man. He could not work, so they would not let him in.... The bond was \$500. My sisters and I had to sign a paper that my parents would not be a burden to the country and that my brother would be sent to school until he was fourteen years old and provided for. They moved into my sister's apartment....

Peter Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words* (New York: Facts on File, 1997), 112-116.